The Fourth Church Pulpit

JESUS AND THE TRUTH

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I know that God acts. But I believe that God can only act incarnationally through the various forms of embodiment that God takes on earth, including our own human form. There is no way for God to act if we, and other created beings, are unwilling or unable to give substance to God's yearnings, God's energies, God's will. We must discern the gifts God gives us, accept them, employ them, pass them along. Without our active cooperation, God's abundance remains in the realm of potential, always there, always available, but forever untapped. To put it into Christian terms, we are called to incarnate the Christ-life.

Parker J. Palmer
The Active Life

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Scripture
John 10:22-30

"Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'" John 18:38 (NRSV)

On some days, at least, my very favorite line in all of literature is by the late Ring Lardner, an American writer in the first part of this century.

The situation is this: a little boy is asking his father a particularly difficult question, over and over, with the persistence of a child obsessively pursuing information. The father becomes increasingly exasperated, then irritated. There is no simple answer; the only answer he knows is too complicated for the child's intellect. It is futile, this incessant battering, bantering, asking. Finally, Lardner describes how the Father brings the impasse to resolution: "Shut up," he explained.

Sometimes it's better to be quiet. Always, it's better to understand the question before providing an answer. This is not academic abstraction, by the way. It's good management.

Stephen Covey's bestseller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,* includes a chapter: "Seek First To Understand, Then To Be Understood." It's number five on the list. Covey writes:

> "Suppose you've been having trouble with your eyes and you decide to go to an optometrist for help. After briefly listening to your complaint, he takes off his glasses and hands them to you.
>
> "'Put these on,' he says. 'I've worn this pair of glasses for ten years now and they've really helped me. I have an extra pair at home; you can wear these.'
>
> "So you put them on, but it only makes the problem worse. 'This is terrible!' you exclaim: I can't see a thing!'
>
> "'Well, what's wrong?' he asks. 'They work great for me. Try harder.'
>
> "'I am trying,' you insist. 'Everything's a blur.'
>
> "'Well, what's the matter with you? Think positively.'
>
> "'Okay, I positively can't see a thing.'
>
> "'Boy, are you ungrateful,' he chides. 'And after all I've done to help you.'"
>
> Covey concludes: "You don't have much confidence in someone who doesn't diagnose before he or she prescribes." [p. 236-7]

Highly successful people, he teaches, always listen very carefully to the problem, the question, before prescribing, trying to resolve, answer.

Sometimes it's better to be quiet.

Purely by coincidence, I found myself in Ponca City, Oklahoma one week after the Oklahoma City bombing, helping to lead a workshop for Presbyterian ministers. The subject was preaching, but what had happened one week before was on everyone's mind and heart. Everyone knew someone, a family, a friend, impacted by the disaster. Somehow what we all experienced — the assault on our way of life, the precious freedoms we most revere, the exposure of a violent, well-armed, and paranoid militia movement preparing to make war against the government — which is us — all of it felt closer, more immediate, in Oklahoma ... And of course the question of the truth: "What was it?" "Who did it?" And "Why?" "Why did it happen?" "Why did God let it happen?" "Why us?"

Once again I learned personally the lesson we all know ... namely that for some questions there are no answers ... for some pain then is only personal presence, touching, standing alongside for an answer.

5/7/95

I thought it was an important moment when Billy Graham, at the memorial service in Oklahoma City, posed the question of "Why?" and had the courage to say: "I don't know why. I don't have an answer to that question."

It was a moment of authentic and important truth.

There are significant silences in scripture. Job pounds on the door of heaven, relentlessly asking God for an answer to the question of his innocent suffering ... with increasing volume. And, for most of the story, the response is silence.

Two times Jesus himself refuses to respond immediately and directly to a specific question put to him. Both of the incidents are in the Gospel according to John. Both of them are powerful.

The first was in the lesson: it is like one of Monet's winter paintings in which pastel colors blend into one another, and sharp detail fades into the refracted light of December. It's Hanukkah. He's in Jerusalem and to find shelter from the raw, biting wind he and his disciples are inside the Temple porch. People who have heard about him gather and begin to ask him questions ... "Tell us plainly. Are you the Messiah?"

What an opportunity! I assume the question was genuine. He could have told them. He could have sat them down and delivered a lecture on the incarnation, tracing his genealogy, establishing himself as the logical heir of King David, the modern fulfillment of scripture's ancient promise, the Messiah, God's chosen. But he doesn't do it.

"I have told you and you do not believe", is all he says to their question. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me."

What that means is that the truth they are after will not be expressed in simple, plain answers. Rather, this truth is so profound it can only be expressed — and perceived — first in silence, then in deeds. "Watch what I am doing", he tells them. "And you will begin to see who I am."

The second incident happens at the end of the story and it is also powerful, but perplexing. Again, a simple question comes and again Jesus has a marvelous opportunity to answer, to dispense the truth. This time the question is direct. Jesus is appearing before Pontius Pilate. He is under arrest and those who want to see him dead must go through Pilate. So Pilate asks: "Are you the King?" And Jesus answers obliquely: "My kingdom is not of this world ... I came into this world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

And you know it's coming. Pilate can't resist asking, "What is truth?"

Some suggest it is sarcasm. Others think he's jesting, cynically mocking the very mention of Truth in so vulgar — and brutish a circumstance: humble carpenter about to be executed — big politician trying to find a way out of the middle. Some think it is the question Pilate asks every night when he suffers from insomnia and too much wine.

"What is truth?"

There is no answer. Jesus is silent. Frederick Buechner calls it "a silence that is almost overwhelming in its eloquence." He had a wonderful opportunity to explain everything to Pilate; to tell him the truth.

Buechner writes:

> "Jesus did not say that religion was the truth or that his own teachings were the truth or that what people taught about him was the truth or the church or any system of ethics or theological doctrine." There are individual truths about all of them, Buechner observes, "but individual truths are not what Pilate was after. 'THE TRUTH' is what Pilate wants — the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself." [Essay: The Truth of Stories, *The Clown In The Belfry,* p. 130].

He is the truth, we believe. Jesus Christ, about to be crucified, is the Truth about us and about life. Jesus Christ risen — is the truth about death, we believe. And that truth is so precious, so perfect, so true, that sometimes — silence — is the only appropriate answer.

Nearly three centuries ago, the colony of Maryland passed an edict of tolerance, making it a colony in which the ancient hatreds between religions, with their competing truth claims, would come to an accommodation with one another. And on this continent, in this new world, a wonderful new idea began to emerge. Human definitions of truth are human. None of them is the ultimate truth. Therefore, different religions, different answers to the question, "What is truth?" can live together - "tolerating" one another. A century later, reflecting on that historic breakthrough, a leading American clergyman, Lyman Abbott said,

> "We must always be mindful to discern the differences between
> our truths and the Truth."

Today, there is, it seems, a concentrated effort in our culture to circumscribe the truth, to define it, describe it, and use it as a weapon against ideological enemies, real or imagined; to resurrect the old and often tragic ideology that I have the truth — all of it, and you don't. And because my truth is the truth, it is imperative, my mission in life, to either convince you of your errors, or destroy your influence, even if I must destroy you in the process. After all, the issue is truth.

Rush Limbaugh uses his portion of the truth to demonize anyone who differs: "feminazis" — dupes — and worse, over and over, demonizing, dehumanizing, and after a relentless stream of vindictive, sarcastic attacks on our government and our leaders, wonders why anyone connects him with those who give physical expression to his violent rhetoric, and millions of Americans cheer.

In the churches, self-appointed guardians of orthodox truth do not simply discuss differences with opponents, but call them heretics, pagans; unfaithful.

It is a time of angry argument in our land, with competing versions of truth used as weapons.

Presbyterian theologian Edward Farley, speaking to the contentious situation in our own Presbyterian family, with an angry and intolerant right-wing firing off barbs and accusations of unfaithfulness and heresy against most of the rest of us, says that in times of stress

> "we are prone to see our (theological) tradition as a kind of preserve
> that needs maintaining, a deposit of doctrines that need recollecting."
> But, Farley says, "deposits of doctrine are not the genius of our tradition.
> If we have a genius it is not so much some distinctive deposit of doctrine
> as a way of transcending our deposited traditions under the constant
> nagging pressure of the question of truth."
> [*The Presbyterian Predicament: The Presbyterian Heritage as Modernism,* p.52]

That's a pretty good definition of a Presbyterian: one who is not so much interested in a deposit of doctrine, as one who transcends particular doctrines under the nagging pressure of the question of truth.

Throughout the culture, the pressure is on to narrow our horizons, define truth as precisely as possible, and then use it to establish the superiority of our system, our way of life, our traditions and to keep out those who disapprove. It's what those who oppose multi-cultural education want. It's what those who propose to close our borders want. It's what those who insist on English only — or Western literature only — want. It's what those want who would define the boundaries of Christianity as sharply as possible so as to eliminate — excise from the body — anyone who disagrees. But there is another way to think about this ... a particularly Presbyterian way, and while it has always been demanding — and therefore not popular with everyone — it just might be a way for our whole culture to get itself out of the ideological warfare in which we find ourselves.

How, for instance, will we talk about abortion? How will we move away from the attempt to somehow justify violence in the name of a truth that not all of us endorse? Must we simply fight it out clinic by clinic?

The alternative is represented by one of our teaching theologians, William Placher. Placher, swimming against the tide, proposes that what we need is more intellectual and theological pluralism, not less.

> "Our need," he says, "is wider intellectual pluralism because of the mess our society is in ... we need major changes in our values and ways of thinking. Maybe some non-Western cultures can teach us something."

Now, it is just at this point in the conversation that people say:

> "Aha! You're proposing that all ideas are of equal weight and there is no single truth." Bill Placher rejects the idea that all ideas are equally true, or all religions are in possession of equal portions of the truth about God. [See *An Unapologetic Theology,* p. 12]

"The secret," he says, "is to separate, as Karl Barth did, the notion of truth from the idea of salvation." Your intellectual opponents may be wrong — but that doesn't mean they are going to hell. Christians believe that salvation is a gift of God, given in Jesus Christ, and that you get it by accepting it and living it, not by agreeing to ideas about truth. And so you can enter dialogue with other religions. You can learn from other traditions. You can cling to your truth without at the same time consigning to hell anyone who disagrees.

Is that not the only way we can live into the future: holding tightly to the truth as we know it in Jesus, but never demeaning, demonizing, denigrating those who do not agree? Rather, remaining open, accepting, willing to talk with anyone about the question of truth.

Jesus remained silent when Pilate asked the question of truth. And the sense of it is that Pilate wants a simple little definition of truth to carry around and use as needed. Jesus, on the other hand, even here, even hours before his crucifixion, is so completely possessed by the truth of God's love that he wants all people, all men and women, even this Roman politician, to know God's love, to live in the new creation which God's love becomes in the world whenever it's accepted and celebrated and lived.

Jesus remains silent because, as he told Thomas, he is the truth: the truth about us, the truth about God, the truth about life and the truth about death. That is truth which will not be coerced. It will not be contained by our words, even our religious words, even the words of our wisest theologians and most eloquent creeds.

Hugh Thomson Kerr, one of the Presbyterian saints of the last generation who died a few years ago, wrote a book, Mystery and Meaning, in which he argued and confessed out of his own life experience that at every stage along the way of our pilgrimage with our faith — and our Lord — there is both meaning and mystery: both clarity about the truth and a deeper, infinitely richer awareness of the final mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ.

"What is truth?" Jesus didn't answer. Silence was the response to that question. Silence ... reverent silence before the mystery of God, the mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ. As we work out in our lives, our answer to the question of truth — that silence is a good place to begin.

"What is truth?" What is the truth in which you will ground your life; the truth for which you live and would die? After the reverent silence. I would propose to you — that He — Jesus the Christ — He is the truth. All praise to him.

Amen.